

“I Can’t Believe We Read This Whole Book!” How Reading for Their Own Purposes Affected Struggling Teens

A classroom teacher and a literacy coach describe how a student’s attempt to derail a lesson became an opportunity to design a student-directed curriculum based on highlighting students’ purposes for reading and writing.

On a dreary afternoon in February, as students pass in the hallway, I (Suzanne) quickly put away materials from my eighth-period Literacy class and prepare for ninth-period Advanced Literacy. As I write notices on the board and greet incoming students, I see a movie projected on the front wall; turning, I find that Lucille has inserted a DVD into the classroom laptop. Recognizing the movie *Twilight*, based on Stephenie Meyer’s young adult fantasy novel about a vampire’s love affair, I direct Lucille to remove the DVD immediately. Alas, Lucille’s classmates have also recognized the movie, and now the challenge is on.

“Come on, Ms. S; let us watch a movie today. You always make us work hard. It’s ninth period; give us a break.”

“Yeah, Ms. S, and this is the book everybody’s reading now!”

“You know better,” I reply. “We have work to do, and *Twilight* is not part of our curriculum. Stop the movie, Lucille.”

As the protests continue, however, something unexpected flickers in my consciousness. Behind my calm expression dance flames of inspiration. *Maybe this is an opportunity I can’t afford to ignore.*

“Ms. S, what’s the big deal if we watch a movie? It’s the same thing as reading the book.”

Or the precursor to reading a book . . . and a way to engage you more fully in literate activities . . . and a way to help you see yourselves as readers . . . and an opportunity for you to direct your own learning . . . and an opportunity for you to engage in computer-based learning and develop digital literacy skills. I am immediately aware

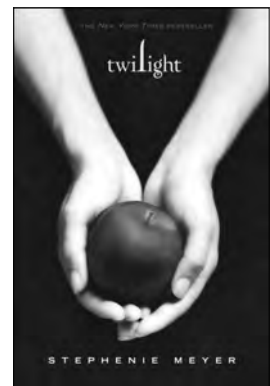
of those many possibilities, and also aware that if I deny the students’ request, I may lose precious gains that I have worked hard to achieve with these particular students. They have experienced literacy struggles throughout their school careers; each of them has an individualized education plan, resists literacy tasks, and is at risk of failing the state assessment in language arts. They do not perceive themselves as successful readers.

“Tell you what,” I propose. “We watch the movie, and then we read the book to find details that the movie didn’t include.”

Amid the cheers, I take from a shelf my copy of *Twilight*, a novel of considerable length. I had placed the book there earlier in hopes that one or two students might find it intriguing; now, the entire class was agreeing to read it.

“Wait. We read the *whole* book, and we do some research to learn more *about* the book,” I specify.

“OK, whatever,” comes the group’s agreement. I take a moment to make direct eye contact



with each student and secure a promise to read the book. Every student promises, and so begins our journey.¹

The Literacy Coach's Perspective: A Research-Based Decision

Several days later, when Suzanne told me (Carol) about the experience she describes above, it was clear that her seemingly impulsive decision was actually the result of much previous reflection, and it connected to our ongoing discussion about her students' self-perceptions and dispositions. The previous year, when Suzanne was assigned to teach remedial reading courses to special education students at our high school, she recognized the need for immediate changes. Like many struggling students described in the research (Long, MacBlain, and MacBlain 131; Torgeson 32; Wigfield 58), her students appeared to disengage from challenging academic tasks because they lacked self-efficacy and perceived themselves as nonreaders or nonwriters. They openly referred to themselves as "dumb" and elaborated, "I can't read" or "I can't write."

Suzanne enlisted my help, and we quickly took steps to secure changes at the administrative level and in her classroom. We successfully lobbied for new course names and structures: Remedial Reading I and II became known as Literacy and Advanced Literacy, respectively. On her classroom library shelves, alongside the remedial reading program materials, Suzanne placed highly engaging texts: trade books, graphic novels, young adult novels, adult novels, poetry collections, and nonfiction texts. She also stocked wire racks with current editions of popular magazines and had newspapers delivered daily. She regularly provided opportunities for students to self-select, read, and respond to those diverse texts, thereby implementing research findings that describe literacy engagement and its link to literacy achievement and development (Brozo, Shiel, and Topping 307; Guthrie and Wigfield 404; Stanovich 381). To engage her students as writers, she capitalized on the eight classroom computers and printer, implementing research suggesting that students find digital literacy activities motivating (O'Brien, Beach, and Scharber 69). Thus she attempted to change her students' self-perceptions by creating a rich and engaging literacy environment

that communicated on every possible level the message, *We are a community of readers and writers.*

When Suzanne talked to me about her decision to allow the viewing of *Twilight*, she said she had immediately recognized in the students' request some opportunities to build upon those changes. First, reading such a lengthy, popular text might support the positive perceptual shift she was trying to effect: the students might come to see themselves as successful readers capable of reading what their peers were currently reading. Second, granting the students' request to view the movie and then read the book would constitute a shift from teacher-driven instruction to student-directed learning: the students had self-selected the text and proposed the sequence of activities. Third, a comparison of the movie and the book might support students' active engagement with the text. I supported Suzanne's decision and helped her recognize that it was consistent with English Language Arts

Standard 12, established by the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English: "Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information)" (32). Reporting on the results of this classroom experience fits well in this issue of *English Journal* devoted to "Reading and Writing for Students' Own Purposes."

As our conference continued, I recognized that Suzanne was also concerned about her students' need to develop digital literacy skills. I had shared with her the findings of Amanda Lenhart, Sousan Arafeh, Aaron Smith, and Alexandra Macgill that although many teenagers participate frequently in out-of-school digital literacies—through information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as text messaging, email, live chats, discussion boards, and blogs—they tend not to consider those activities as *real* reading or writing. Hence, those activities do not help students perceive themselves as readers or writers. Additionally, students in their late teens and early 20s report using technology more for purposes of entertainment, gaming, and/or

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social networking than for academic purposes (Leu; Wilber 559). I had also shared a concern voiced by the International Reading Association and others (Coiro et al. 14) that students who lack skills and experience with ICT-based learning and communication will be disadvantaged in the Information Age, especially students of lower economic status—like several of Suzanne's students—who may be in-

creasingly unable to compete in a global economy and socio-political arena. Hearing those concerns, Suzanne had previously agreed to work with me to plan technology-based lessons; now her students had given her the perfect opportunity to implement them. Suzanne incorporated Web-based reading and research to expand their appreciation of *Twilight* and to engage them in a blended-literacies experience. Suzanne laughed while

describing the classroom scene. "The students thought I relented because of their persistent coaxing. They had no idea I was remembering our discussions and considering lesson-design options. I was brainstorming ideas for a comprehensive unit while the students were watching the movie's opening scenes!"

The Teacher Describes Unit One

The learning unit that evolved for the novel *Twilight* accomplished many goals and yielded many benefits for my (Suzanne's) students: it integrated their personal interests into school-based literacy learning; enabled them to use language to accomplish their own purposes; sustained their motivation and engagement through self-selected, student-directed learning activities; developed their reading stamina for a novel of 500 pages; helped them perceive themselves as successful readers; facilitated their sophisticated analysis of the text; and engaged them in technology-based learning. The first prereading activity, viewing the movie, integrated students' interests and goals, activated existing schema, and developed background knowledge for the eventual reading of the novel. After watching the movie, stu-

dents read digital texts as I guided their exploration of the author's website (<http://www.stepheniemeyer.com>). Initially, I directed the website exploration, dictating which pages the students should access. Their first assignment was to investigate the page describing the town of Forks, Washington, and decide how that particular setting enhanced the story. This step extended students' background knowledge and facilitated critical thinking about authorial choices, thereby fostering deeper appreciation of the novel. Simultaneously, the website exploration yielded opportunities for students to practice Internet research skills such as website navigation and the reading of nonlinear, Web-based text. After the students analyzed the setting's impact on the novel, they were free to self-select and explore other related pages on the author's website to accomplish learning for their own purposes.

Having completed those prereading activities, we then read the entire novel. To integrate writing, foster personal connections and transactions with the text, sustain motivation, and support comprehension, I avoided traditional teacher-generated comprehension questions and instead required students to maintain reader-response journals. As I had anticipated, my students periodically expressed some fatigue and uncertainty about their ability to read the entire book; however, they also demonstrated admirable determination and motivation. For example, after one student lamented, "We'll never finish this book," I attempted to provide support by summarizing half of the next chapter. To my surprise, the students objected: "We're not really reading the whole book if you're summarizing!" I provided no further summaries, and in the end, the students demonstrated both pride and sustained engagement. I was thrilled to hear comments such as these:

"I can't believe we really read this whole book!"

"I can't wait to see the next movie in the series."

"Can we learn more about the actors and actresses in the movie?"

Happy to oblige, I extended the learning unit by allocating time for additional self-selected readings, both print and digital. Students chose articles

from Internet websites, Scholastic *Scope*, and various popular magazines to learn more about the movie's cast members. Thus the students continued to direct their learning, engage in literacy activities to accomplish their own purposes, and practice digital literacy skills, in this case with nonfiction texts.

I was happy to see the students so highly engaged in reading; however, I began to grow uneasy about transitioning to the next unit of study, in which they would read teacher-selected, nonfiction texts that my former students had found dull and uninteresting. Wondering how to sustain this high level of energy and enthusiasm, I decided to address that issue during an upcoming conference with Carol, my literacy coach and coauthor.

The Literacy Coach's Perspective: Building upon the Initial Success

Suzanne expressed in our meeting that she could not have been happier about her students' dispositions. Just as she had hoped, they were delighted that they had read a long and popular novel. She was gratified when I pointed out that the students' request to do follow-up readings—to learn more about the cast members—was a sign that they “were developing strong learning habits in and positive attitudes toward the English language arts” (IRA and NCTE 32). Nonetheless, she recognized some goals remained unmet. Specifically, the students' progress in meeting English Language Arts Standard 12 had been limited: students had engaged in literacy activities for purposes of learning and enjoyment, but not for purposes of persuasion or exchange of information. Furthermore, the students' engagement in digital literacies had been limited to website exploration, not digital text composition or communication. Consequently, she assessed the experience as only partially successful.

Suzanne also shared concerns about the upcoming instructional unit, a study of nonfiction texts about African Americans' struggles to achieve civil rights during the 1950s and 1960s. During the previous school year, her students had expressed little interest, even asking, “Is this a history class or a literacy class?” Suzanne's attempts to create enthusiasm

for this important study had been largely unsuccessful. Would this year's students respond even more negatively because they had just completed a unit in which they had self-directed much of the learning and read for their own purposes?

Together we set general goals and considered specific learning activities similar to those in the *Twilight* unit. Primarily, Suzanne wanted to incorporate students' personal interests and allow student-directed learning as much as possible. She also wanted to expand the technology-based component to include ICT-based communication, if possible. Suzanne felt confident she could meet the primary goals by showing students a movie that focused on racial segregation and football (a high-interest topic for her students) and allowing students' responses to determine subsequent learning activities. When the unit was introduced, she had not yet selected specific activities to meet the goals for technology-based learning, but we agreed to continue conferencing about them.

The Teacher Describes Unit Two

To begin this unit of study, students read short, nonfiction texts about civil rights leaders Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Little Rock Nine. These readings met a multicultural initiative set by the school district and the English department, and they provided practice with the nonfiction genre that my students often find challenging. Additionally, the readings established a context and set a purpose for subsequent components of the instructional unit. Next, we viewed the movie *Remember the Titans*, based on the true story of racial tension surrounding a high school football team and its newly appointed coach, African American Howard Boone.

I selected that particular movie to incorporate my students' interest in high school football, thus sustaining their motivation and engagement with the unit's theme and content. To integrate writing and support comprehension of the movie plot, I began each class by requiring a brief writing to summarize and interpret events from the previous day's viewing and to make predictions about the next movie segment. The movie spurred strong verbal reactions



from the students such as, "I can't believe blacks couldn't get served in restaurants!" and "Why do people act like that?" Responding to those reactions, I made connections back to the nonfiction, historical texts we had read to begin the unit.

Throughout the viewing experience, students expressed interest and curiosity about the Titans football team members and their experi-

ences. Students wondered aloud what some of the football players might be doing now. One asked, "Is Coach Boone still alive? Where can we find more information about him?" Seizing this opportunity for students to read once again for their own purposes, I pointed the students to the Official Titans' Website (<http://www.71originaltitans.com>) that presents a wealth of information and a discussion board. Having the students explore the website and engage in computer-mediated

discussion with Titans team members would enable them to meet Standard 12 more fully and engage in ICT-based communication for their own, academic purposes.

Because the students had already expressed a desire to learn about the team, I allowed the entire website exploration to be student-directed. The students enjoyed reading about the team's physical workout schedules and summer camp routines. They also opted to read biographical information about the players, sometimes remarking, "Hey, look what this guy's doing now!" or "Look what I found." After allowing ample time for exploration, I introduced the final component of the unit, participation on the Titans team members' discussion board. Because this was a public forum with real consequences for participants in it, I did not permit students to post comments or questions independently; rather, I required that they submit them to me for initial review. I edited the students' writing not only for mechanical errors but also for any statements that might be construed as racially insensitive or offensive. Then I synthesized students' remarks and questions in preparation for posting.

Students' initial attempts to post to the discussion board revealed a general lack of experience and skills. Consequently, I posted the students' messages during class time so as to demonstrate the necessary skills and processes. As students' digital skills developed, I relinquished that responsibility. These discussion board exchanges extended the students' learning as team members replied to inquiries about racial conflicts in the 1970s and the present time, the accuracy of the movie, and how the players' personal lives had changed over the decades.

The Literacy Coach's Perspective: A Practice Transformed

Suzanne's immediate reflections at the conclusion of this second instructional unit were entirely positive. She was satisfied that the video and student-directed website explorations had indeed fostered engagement with the content and themes of the nonfiction, historical texts; she cited the students' strong personal responses (shared above) as evidence of that engagement. Suzanne also expressed satisfaction and excitement about her students' digital discussions with the Titans football team members. She reported, "The students were so excited every day to check for replies on the discussion board. And when team members did reply, the students enjoyed reading and discussing the messages. They wanted to keep the dialogue going." I helped her recognize

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Thompson-McClellan Photography

these behaviors as evidence that the students were progressing on both technology and language arts standards: the students were voluntarily and enthusiastically connecting and exchanging information with people outside their own classroom and social group to extend and deepen their curriculum-related learning.

Perhaps more remarkable, however, is what I did *not* see or hear in Suzanne's reflections. Unlike at the conclusion of the *Twilight* unit, she expressed no concerns about how to move forward through the curriculum or how to sustain the students' enthusiasm. To the contrary, she matter-of-factly stated that the teaching and learning in her Literacy and Advanced Literacy courses would never be the same. Elaborating, she said that neither she nor her students could be content with less engaging, teacher-driven units of study that did not allow students to read for their own purposes and direct their own learning. Her confidence was obvious, and our conferences grew less frequent as the school year came to a close.


Why Students' Purposes Matter

Two years have passed since that dreary February day when Lucille projected the movie *Twilight* on the classroom wall. Suzanne reports that she designs almost all of her learning units as we have described here because she observes such positive student responses. She reports that the students are motivated to read both print and digital texts, they engage in traditional and digital writing, and they see themselves as real readers and writers.

We share our story because it demonstrates the importance and power of focusing on students' purposes, as highlighted in Standard 12, a standard not often addressed or assessed, but one that matters so much to students and teachers alike. How did Suzanne allow her students to use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes? She used the students' requests, questions, and remarks to select and adapt texts and learning activities that specifically addressed the students' unique interests. When students asked questions, Suzanne allocated time in class for reading a wide variety of texts that might provide answers.

How did Suzanne's students benefit from this focus on Standard 12? They increased the amount

and the breadth of their in-class reading and writing. Several students used in-class readings as a springboard to further readings, movie selections, and literary conversations. All the students became members of a literary community that transcended the classroom walls. They read popular texts enjoyed by their stronger-reading peers, and they communicated digitally with readers and writers outside the class to exchange information.

Equally important is the impact on the classroom teacher. Suzanne began this journey with uncertainty, initially not sure she should step away from her instructional plan, and later unsure of how to build upon the early successes. Through close observation of her students, reflective analysis of her practice, and collegial collaboration with her literacy coach, Suzanne grew comfortable and confident in a new role as the leader of student-directed learning. Her transformation ensures that Suzanne's future students will benefit from this experience. We hope our story enables readers to envision similar transformations for themselves and their students. 

Note

1. This particular district admirably permits considerable teacher authority and flexibility regarding text and activities, so long as teachers honor the goals, objectives, and skills/strategies identified in the curriculum. Teacher decisions are discussed with the LA supervisor and/or assistant superintendent.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Suzanne's class was motivated by first watching the film adaptation of *Twilight* and then reading the text. The ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan "Storyboarding the Transformation from Dr. Jekyll into Mr. Hyde" does the reverse: While reading *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, students discuss a psychological (versus "monster story") interpretation of the transformation of Dr. Jekyll into Mr. Hyde. Students then imagine how they would depict the transformation to illustrate their interpretation of the event and then storyboard those interpretations. After sharing their storyboards with the class, students view transformation scenes from a variety of film adaptations of the book, discuss the interpretations offered by the adaptations, and argue for their preferences. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/storyboarding-transformation-from-jekyll-30751.html>

Jennifer Buehler Named 2011 Promising Researcher Winner

Jennifer Buehler of Saint Louis University has been awarded the 2011 Promising Researcher Award for "'We Have a Culture of Failure Here': Analyzing the Production of School Culture in an Urban High School." This award is given in commemoration of Bernard O'Donnell and is sponsored by the NCTE Standing Committee on Research. The award will be presented at the NCTE Annual Convention in Chicago, Illinois, at the Opening Session of the Day of Research, Saturday, November 19, 2011. Promising Researcher Award Committee: Cynthia Lewis, Chair; Standing Committee on Research: Valerie Kinloch, Chair.

Interested in applying for the 2012 Promising Researcher Award? Go to www.ncte.org/about/awards/council/research for more information.